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ABSTRACT

Selecting a child care program for infants presents special challenges for parents. This brochure provides information for parents on: the importance of high quality caregiving for their infant's development; infants' abilities and needs for warm human contact; important caregiver characteristics; and the caregiver-family partnership. The brochure also discusses how to ease the transition to a new care setting for infants and their families. Also provided is a checklist of child health and safety items that parents can use when visiting a center or family child care home. In addition, the brochure contrasts beneficial and poor practices for infant programs with regard to group size, caregivers' behavior, schedules and procedures, and activities. A list of further readings and resources available through the National Association for the Education of Young Children concludes the brochure. (KB)

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A Caring Place for Your Infant

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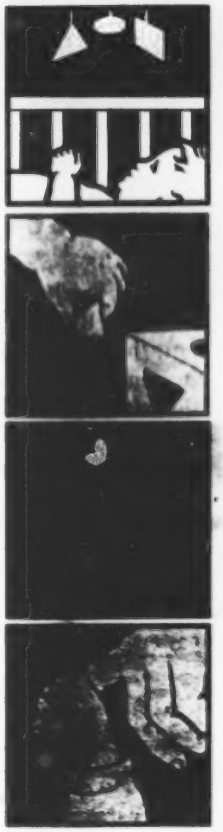

A baby coos and kicks as a parent speaks softly to her. Inside her young brain, countless connections are being made.

Every day we learn more about the incredible capacities of infants. Babies react to noise, changes in lighting, and new people—proof that they are aware from the very beginning of sights, sounds, and others in their lives. Although infants cannot tell us in words that they are hungry, in need of a diaper change, or just bored and ready for a new position, they make sounds, facial expressions, and movements that express their feelings and needs.

Caring for infants on a day-to-day basis presents special challenges and opportunities to promote children's learning and allow families to thrive. Parents are looking for centers or home settings where caregivers not only ensure children's safety and comfort but also foster infants' physical, sensory, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Good caregiving means that more and stronger connections are made in the infant's brain—connections that last a lifetime. And by connecting with warm, caring adults at the start of life, children also begin developing the ability to connect with others throughout life.

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INFANTS

From the beginning, infants show a wide variety of physical abilities. Over the first few months, as they gain control of their hands and feet, their movements become more coordinated and purposeful. Movement is exploration. Pulling, reaching, kicking, grasping, and releasing are babies' learning activities. As they roll, scoot, rock, and bounce, they discover how their bodies move and feel. They respond to rhythm, music, song, and pleasant tone of voice.

Babies may follow objects and people with their eyes, but they do not look for objects when they are hidden from view. They have not yet developed what scientists call "object permanence"—that's why a game like peekaboo is so exciting for them. As babies develop with the support of a parent or other skilled caregiver, they begin to recognize familiar objects, events, and people, then to anticipate their return.

Most of all, babies enjoy warm human contact. They know by the tone of voice whether a person is friendly, sad, or angry. In their own individual ways, they respond to the emotions of people around them. It may not be immediately apparent, but babies are forming a foundation for relationships they will develop throughout their lives.

CAREGIVER

Like parents, good caregivers know that babies grow and learn best when they feel secure. That's why it's important for adults to respond consistently. Infants develop trust and security when they know that caregivers will be right there to help if they are hungry, wet, or uncomfortable.

Caregivers must become familiar with the eating and sleeping rhythms of the individual babies in their care. The caregiver also must stay in tune with the rapidly changing needs of each baby as he or she grows. For example, young infants usually enjoy being held and cuddled, but as they become better able to move around by themselves, they may push someone away in order to be on their own.

Before infants become mobile, they can do little to provide themselves with interesting objects and experiences. Caregivers who have a strong knowledge of child development and know the individual infant well are able to sense when experiences are not challenging enough and when they are too overwhelming. Once older infants begin to use words, caregivers often support these early attempts at communication by repeating what they say and adding to or elaborating upon it (Child: "Milk!" Caregiver: "Milk? You want more milk?"), naming things and actions, and listening carefully for other cues.

CAREGIVER/FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Many changes occur in a baby's first year. It seems that at one moment she is clinging to a parent at the sight of a stranger and at the next she's off exploring on her own. As babies become more independent, parents are often delighted, but wistful too.

A good relationship between parents and caregivers helps ease parents' minds and helps children begin a lifelong pursuit of learning. The more parents and caregivers communicate, the better they can provide for the changing needs of the child.

Babies benefit from continuity between the home and child care settings. This means that parents and caregivers, on a daily basis, should discuss feeding, toileting, and other events. Caregivers and parents should maintain daily communication about what has occurred in children's lives since their last meeting and what is coming up. Some caregivers use clipboards or notes to facilitate communication with parents; others rely on good discussions at the beginning and end of the day. As long as communication is thorough and consistent, families and caregivers will grow to trust one another.

An infant's day centers around routines. Activities such as hellos and good-byes with parents, diapering, napping, and dressing are in effect the "curriculum" that helps infants develop. Skilled caregivers take these opportunities to talk to children, explain what is going on, and build closer ties.

Good caregivers show respect for a baby's home culture and the parents' childrearing style. If disagreements or misunderstandings occur, parents must feel free to talk openly with the caregiver. Particularly when the home language of a child is different from that of a caregiver, parents and caregivers must work together to create an environment that is best suited for the long-term development of the child.

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YOU AND YOUR CHILD IN TRANSITION

Every infant reacts differently to a new care setting. Some make the transition with relative ease. Others may cry and fuss, afraid that their parents are not coming back. Trained caregivers successfully work through this critical period of adjustment. The goal is for babies to feel comfortable, secure, and confident they can cope with their new surroundings.

The transition does not occur magically. The child's age influences his or her ability to adjust. For example, infants 6 months and younger often adjust readily, but between 6 and 15 months, many babies experience more intense separation anxiety. This may not be true in every case—each baby is different. Those identified as being at risk, such as preterm infants, babies with chronic illnesses or genetic or congenital disorders, may take longer to become comfortable in their child care settings.

A good relationship between parents and caregivers helps ease the transition for all those involved. Parents may have a difficult time separating from infants, particularly when the baby is distressed. Older infants who have learned to enjoy the company of other babies and adults may be so busy exploring, they will barely notice when parents leave. (This can hurt parents' feelings too.)

Parents can find out ahead of time how a program handles transitions. Some programs encourage parents to leave children gradually, starting with just a few hours a day. Others allow parents to stay all day, then to leave for short periods of time, which helps children understand that they will return.

Helping parents cope with transition is another aspect of good caregiving. A good caregiver reaffirms that nothing can substitute for a parent's love and that strong bonds with a few warm, caring adults help children thrive. If adults demonstrate trust and respect for one another, babies will adjust more smoothly, building a strong foundation for hellos and good-byes throughout their lives.

Health and Safety Checklist

Good programs take many precautions to keep children healthy and safe. Caregivers check the environment before children arrive and make sure it remains in good shape throughout the day. Parents may not immediately notice these precautions, or they might not know what to look for.

Here are some things that should be readily visible to a parent visiting a center or family child care home.

- Electrical outlets are covered.
- Floors are carpeted and free of objects that might trip children.
- Toys are clean, nontoxic, and not swallowable; they have no small or breakable parts.
- High chairs, changing tables, strollers, and swings are equipped with safety buckles.
- Cribs have no more than 2-3/8 inches of space between slats.
- A stocked first-aid kit is kept on hand.
- Caregivers have a knowledge of CPR and emergency procedures.
- The diaper-changing table is well organized with diapering supplies and extra clothes with-in easy reach. Also in this area is a sink, with disinfectant and paper towels at hand.
- Caregivers hold infants with their bodies at an angle when feeding; children are never left to "feed themselves" from bottles propped on pillows.

IN YOUR INFANT'S PROGRAM . . .

What you want to see	What you don't want to see
Group size is limited to no more than eight babies, with at least one caregiver for every three children. Each infant is able to form a bond with a primary caregiver, and each caregiver can get to know a few babies very well.	Caregivers have too many children in their care to respond to infants individually. Infants are moved from group to group or cared for by whatever caregiver is available at the time, preventing babies and caregivers from forming important one-to-one relationships. *or* Poor salaries and benefits or working conditions cause high turnover in the program, depriving babies of the security that comes from bonds with adults who care for them.
Caregivers show warmth and support to infants throughout the day, making eye contact and talking to them about what is going on.	Adults handle children in an impersonal or hurried manner, without responding to babies' sounds and letting them know they are listening.
Alert to babies' cues, adults hold infants or move them to a new place or position, giving them variety in what they are able to look at and do.	Babies are left in one position for too long or moved around abruptly at the convenience of adults.
Caregivers pay close attention and talk to children during routines such as changing diapers, feeding, and changing clothes.	Adults are inattentive to children's needs or carry out daily routines without warmth, not making a habit of playing with or talking to babies.
Caregivers talk, sing, and read to babies, enabling infants to become familiar with language and ultimately to recognize words and sounds.	Babies spend long periods of time in cribs, playpens, or seats without adults' attention. Instead of responding to babies' coos and sounds, caregivers ignore or talk over them. *or* Adults are careless about their words and tone around infants, or they use limited language. Too much or too little chatter by caregivers discourages babies from staying alert and interested.
Babies eat and sleep when they are most comfortable doing so. Caregivers consider infants' individual preferences for food and styles of eating.	Caregivers hold babies to rigid schedules of sleeping and eating with concern only for the convenience of adults.
Caregivers follow standards for health and safety, including proper handwashing to limit the spread of infectious disease.	Specific procedures for diapering (including handwashing), cleaning cribs and play areas, and food storage and preparation are not clearly thought out or written down. Caregivers do not consistently maintain sanitary conditions.
Caregivers can see and hear infants at all times.	Infants are left unattended at naptime.
Parents and caregivers share children's activities and development on a daily basis, building a mutual understanding and trust. Caregivers welcome parents to drop by the home or center.	Instead of affirming the central role of parents in their children's development, caregivers dismiss or ignore parents' concerns and observations. Parents feel as if they are in the way and only hear about the conflicts or problems of the day.

FURTHER READINGS/RESOURCES FROM NAEYC

Bredekamp, S., C. Copple, eds. 1997. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs, Rev. ed.* (Book) NAEYC order #234

Dittmann, L.L. *Finding the best care for your infant or toddler.* (Brochure) NAEYC order #518

How to choose a good early childhood program. (Brochure) NAEYC order #525; in Spanish #510

McCracken, J.B. *Off to a sound start: Your baby's first year.* (Brochure) NAEYC order #574

McCracken, J.B. So many goodbyes: Ways to ease the transition between home and groups for young children. (Brochure) NAEYC order #573

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National Association for the Education of Young Children,
1509 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-1426
202-232-8777 800-424-2460 FAX 202-328-1846
Website: http://www.naeyc.org

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